

## The Plight of Godlessness in Eastern and Western Literature: A Comparative Reading of Absurdity in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of absurdity in literature as a feature of modern human bereft of God. It compares and contrasts two canons of the Theater of the Absurd in the West and the East, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956) with Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *Ya tali' al-shajarah* (1962) [*The Tree Climber* (1966)]. These plays have dramatized the absurdity of the human condition after World War II. Consequently, this paper offers an understanding of absurdity in Christian and Muslim cultures through the tenets of comparative literature. As the idea of absurdity is presented differently in various works, this article chiefly focuses on the selected plays to reveal their writers' depiction of the absence of God. It is concluded that although *The Tree Climber* benefited from many characteristics of absurd literature, Al-Hakim's views toward human existence, hope, and God convey different messages from those of Beckett's. For Al-Hakim, hope is still found in the fertilization of a garden tree and spirituality is seen in the image of Dervish, who concludes the play with verses from the Quran. However, for Beckett, hope is impossible, characters are suicidal, and God is the never-coming God(ot).

**Keywords:** Absurd; God; Comparative Literature; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber*.

### Introduction

The term, "The Theater of the Absurd," was introduced by Martin Esslin to refer to the work of a number of playwrights, who were mostly active during the 1950s and 1960s in Europe. Absurd, as a literary school, mainly emphasizes the human beings' chaotic situation and confusion in the absence of God. Both western and eastern artists from different religious

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and historical backgrounds have addressed this issue in literature. However, no comprehensive and comparative study has approached the problem, though it has been a shared human concern and a motivation for creating many literary works in various forms. Therefore, the present study utilizes the tenets of comparative literature to fill the long-lasting gap in the literature of the absurd created in Christian and Muslim societies.

The absurd arises out of the essential disharmony between the individual's search for God, purpose, existence, life's significance, and the meaninglessness of the universe. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines this term by likening human to Sisyphus, a figure in Greek mythology who was doomed to move a massive rock up a hill daily only to witness its rolling down just before it reached the top in the evening: "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of God, illusions and of lights, man feels an alien, a stranger . . . [in] an irremediable exile. This divorce between man and his life, . . . truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (1955, 5). Esslin, by quoting Ionesco, an acknowledged absurdist dramatist, describes the term as "[anything or anyone] devoid of purpose . . . cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots. Man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (1965, 16).

In France, Beckett, and in Egypt, Al-Hakim, as two important pioneers in dramatic art during the twentieth-century were both affected by the same absurdist school originated in France. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish-born novelist, playwright, theater director, and poet. Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898- 1987) was an Egyptian novelist, dramatis, and critic. Beckett was familiar with the Bible and Al-Hakim read both the Bible and the Quran. During their writings, they attempted to portray the general condition of the modern human and his/her most challenging difficulties in the absence of God. Comparative literature can cast light on what Beckett and Al-Hakim shared. Wellek (1903-1995), the forefather of comparative literature, claims that comparative literature deals with special sets of human quandary depicted in the world literature. It is the study of relationships between two or more works from different cultures. Only through a comparative lens might one discover shared human dilemmas (Wellek and Warren 1985, 325).

This study aims to explore the multiple versions of absurdity and the absence of God in different western and eastern settings by focusing on *Waiting for Godot* (1956) and *Ya tali ' al-shajarah* (1962) translated as *The Tree Climber* (1966). Samuel Beckett is one of the most eminent writers in

this mode, who adopted different dramatic forms to express his anguish in a Godless world. His *Waiting for Godot* is the most famous example of absurdist drama. Interestingly, Arab intellectuals like Tawfiq al-Hakim witnessed the performance of absurd dramas in France, and returned to the Arab world to reproduce the modern human predicament: Godlessness. Al-Hakim composed some of his most famous absurd dramas in modern Arabic theater, among which *The Tree Climber* is the best-known. The bulk of literature written in English, French, and Arabic dedicated to these two plays is considerable (Sidebottom 2020, Said 2019, Ghandeharion et al 2017; Abdel-Daem 2014; Scott 2012; Bloom 2008; Al-Najar 2001; Icoz 1993; Hamoodi 1987). Yet, the paucity of any comprehensive and comparative approach is the motivation behind this research. That is why two of the pillars of absurd drama are chosen via a comparative lens to shed light on a universal human problem in a Godless world: be it Beckett who was born to Christian parents in Ireland or Al-Hakim brought up by a Muslim family in Egypt. Needless to mention that by a comparative approach, we do not suggest that absurdity was interpreted unanimously and homogeneously by western and eastern cultures. Our study strives to answer this question: How and why does Al-Hakim's version of absurdity resemble to or differ from Beckett's? The objective is to examine the differences between these plays, regarding the status of God in the absurd world, from multidimensional perspectives such as setting and stage props, the language and silence in the play, characterization, the image of the savior, and name significance.

## **2. The Western and the Eastern Absence of God: A Glance at Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber***

*Waiting for Godot* (1953), a tragicomedy written in two acts, introduces the genre of absurd to world drama. On a country road, two tramps, Vladimir nicknamed as DiDi and Estragon or GoGo, wait endlessly for the arrival of someone named Godot, or God(ot), small God, who always promises to come but never shows up. Other characters named Pozzo and Lucky respectively represent master and slave. They refer to the impossibility of the existence of Godot. A young Boy, Godot's messenger, who is mistreated by Godot, appears twice and tells Vladimir that Godot will not arrive tonight but will certainly come tomorrow. Act two is the replica of the first act and it is concluded that if the play had other acts, the same ending with the promise of a nonexistent Godot would happen *ad infinitum*.

*The Tree Climber* (1962), a tragicomic parody of detective genre, is one of the most effective plays in the Arab homeland because of its innovative use of language, the depiction of human dilemmas and the portrayal of absurdity (Allawi 2006, 236). Like *Waiting for Godot*, it consists of two acts. The play starts with the disappearance of Behana, Bahadir's Wife, after a shopping trip. The Detective comes to Bahadir's house, to interrogate him, Maidservant and Dervish about this incident. The interrogation turns into a farce when suddenly the Wife enters the stage as if nothing happened. Once a believer and a lover, now the disillusioned Husband spends time in his garden with Lady Green, *Shaykhah Khadra*, a lizard who has taken a sanctuary in the garden tree. At the end of the play, the absence of believing in God, the lack of understanding between the couple, and Behana's infertility leads to the tragic murder of the Wife by the Husband who buries her under the tree.

The short summaries of these absurd plays reveal that the Arab drama is not a mere replica of its western counterpart. In his introduction to *The Tree Climber*, Al-Hakim claims that absurdity has its roots in the Arab culture (14). However, absurdity and meaninglessness could not be accepted in the Arab literature because of their contradiction with Islamic values: "In our Islamic religion . . . , we don't believe that God has created the world meaninglessly. Rather we believe that there is a wise purpose behind the creation of the world with all its harmony" (Lucy 1987, 38).

In both plays, the characters are doomed to suffer from Godless hopelessness where they perform futile and repetitive actions. Their dialogues are filled with clichés and nonsense (Asaad 1989, 160). *The Tree Climber* not only provides its readers with a novel version of the Theater of the Absurd, but it also gives us a different perspective on the modern life. There is no indication that Al-Hakim subscribes to all tenets of absurdist art (Al-Magaleh 1988, 117). Rooted in the folklore and popular oral stories, *The Tree Climber* connects the new generation with the old traditions mentally and spiritually. Al-Hakim's and Becket's treatment of existentialist crisis are different. Al-Hakim reflects on the problems of the Muslim Arab world and mourning for the absence of God; whereas in Becket's plays, God's nonexistence and human dilemmas are bleakly ridiculed. Al-Hakim does not utilize the same techniques for reproducing the external features of western absurdist plays. He refuses the gloomy outlook of absurdity and gives his absurdist play a spiritual facet (Al-Najar 2010, 135).

*Waiting for Godot* concerns two symbolic characters who, through their actions and dialogues, represent the plight and chaotic state of the modern man. Beckett's work has laid its focus mainly on Godless human condition and the ordeal of waiting for a savior. *The Tree Climber* differs from *Waiting for Godot* in that Al-Hakim adopts only some of the western features of the absurd theater, such as incoherent language, minimalist stage props and chaotic time, place and narrative. In fact, he has constructed his own dramatic features according to Arab identity and Muslim culture (Allen 2000, 204) by mixing ancient rituals with nursery rhymes and Islamic traditions, like prayers and recitation from the Quran, despite the absence of God.

Despite strong rejection of any dominant European structure within the Arab society, Al-Hakim adopted the Theater of the Absurd in some of his plays. His style, the mixture of western and eastern cultures, has played an important role in the development of Arabic literature. He was influenced by eastern and western cultures in form and style (Asaad 1989, 159). His plays, particularly *The Tree Climber*, clearly demonstrate this influence (Asaad 1989, 150-160). The ironic and sarcastic tone of western absurd drama is portrayed through Al-Hakim's stage-action incongruity. In *The Tree Climber*, Al-Hakim uses a free stage in which analeptic scenes happen in one direction, while action happens in another; thus, unelaborated narratives or past events contradict the explanation, cause, or motivation of stage events and characters' actions. Al-Hakim claims that he only wants to explore the form and method of western drama to create a new message: "I do not belong to this [Absurd] movement" and "I intentionally used the word 'irrational' because it expresses my own direction and stance [which is] different from the Theater of the Absurd as named in Europe and America" (Al-Najar 2001, 140).

### 3. The Godless World of the Plays

Space, time, dialogue, setting, and characters are interconnected so extensively that there is no specific line to separate their various dimensions in a play. The emergence of past and present occurs through dialogues and off-stage sound effects in both plays. Furthermore, both Beckett and Al-Hakim intentionally deviate from traditional forms of the stage in order to confirm the irrationality in the Godless world of the play. This section reveals how *Waiting for Godot* gives a sense of isolation, while *The Tree Climber* offers an impossibility of intellectual

communication in a Godless world. For Beckett, God and savior are an inseparable entity summarized in Godot. For Al-Hakim, spiritualism, God, faith, and religion are depicted in Dervish. Both plays show how the modern human fails to find a connection with God, religion, or spirituality.

### 3.1. Bare Setting and Stage Props

The main stage props in *Waiting for Godot* are road and a single tree. Road clearly echoes life journey, which has its counterpart in Al-Hakim's train journey. A vacant road is the basic setting of *Waiting for Godot*, whereas the train journey does not play a central role in *The Tree Climber*. Beckett's tree differs from Al-Hakim's visionary tree. In Christianity, tree is the symbol of knowledge and life (Graver 2004, 14). Vladimir and Estragon spend all their time in front of a tree that is barren and nameless. Thus, their hope to meet Godot near this tree is void and senseless. These two tramps cannot move because their minds are obsessed with waiting for Godot. They cope with Godlessness by engaging in absurd dialogues and meaningless silences.

VLADIMIR: He [Godot] said by the tree.

ESTRAGON: What is it?

VLADIMIR: I do not know. A willow.

ESTRAGON: Where are the leaves?

VLADIMIR: It must be dead (Beckett 2010, 61).

This tree's symbolic worth in Christian culture can be interpreted as Jesus's cross. For Vladimir/DiDi and Estragon/GoGo, it is a self-made scaffold. Estragon has forgotten that this is the same tree from which he and Vladimir nearly hanged themselves because of boredom.

On the other hand, Bahadir's tree is an extraordinary plant producing four kinds of fruit. According to Dervish, this tree is the best nutrient that accommodates all human needs since it represents the "contradictions of the human body"; it produces flowers with no fragrance and uneatable fruit (Al-Hakim 1988, 98). It is the same tree under which Dervish recites verses from the Quran. This spiritual twist in Al-Hakim is the main deviance from western absurdity. Reflecting the human desire for spirituality in a Godless world, the tree is an ever-present part of the stage in both plays. As for Al-Hakim, even the play's title is related to this tree. Bahadir kills his wife to fertilize his tree as a replacement for the child he wishes to have. When he strangles Behana and buries her under the tree, the tree gives birth to fruits.

For Al-Hakim, in a Godless world, there is no time and space. He dismisses the laws of probability and possibility by allowing his characters to move freely from one place to another (Zeyad 1979, 97). Similarly, Beckett depicts Godlessness in a barren and timeless stage. Like Bahadir and Behana, Vladimir and Estragon kill time either in waiting for being investigated or waiting for Godot to save them.

### 3.2. Language of Infertility

In the Godless world of the modern man portrayed by absurdist dramatists, human communication seems impossible and silence is as futile as speech. The only meaningful conversation between Bahadir and Behana leads to the murder of Behana, “I shall be receiving from you answers to my questions [by your death]” (Al-Hakim 1988, 149). In *Waiting for Godot*, the characters refuse to be engaged in any type of serious conversation because they think it is only with the arrival of Godot that they can understand each other.

Both plays are characterized by misunderstanding and miscommunication. Language loses its meaning and function. Since a meaningful conversation with God does not exist, characters aimlessly talk *at* each other to prove their own existence: “We always find something, eh DiDi, to give us the impression we exist?” (Beckett 2010, 65). This technique reveals modern human’s alienation in the absence of God. In both acts of *Waiting for Godot*, characters continuously repeat: “Nothing to be done” and “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes; it’s awful!” (Beckett 2010, 76).

In Christianity, speech, or to be more precise, “the Word,” is tightly linked to God, authenticity and meaning: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Beckett has succeeded to portray silence as a particular vehicle in his plays (Weagel 2016, 254). Silence can be interpreted as positive or negative. The coexistence of speech and silence is an important feature in *Waiting for Godot* to deliver the impression of absurdity in the absence of God. Beckett concentrates on silence and pauses to portray the uselessness of human action, irrationality of life, hesitation, and the impracticality of communication.

Similarly in Islam, God, meaning-making and speech are closely linked: “God taught Adam all the Names/Words” (Q 2:3). Silence in *The Tree Climber*, specifically regarding Behana’s refusal to communicate, is

the main reason that leads to her death. Behana refuses to reveal why she disappeared by remaining silent. *Waiting for Godot* ends with silence and immovability (Beckett 2010, 91), while *The Tree Climber's* ending is marked with Bahadir's murder of his wife and Dervish's concluding recitation of the Quran, Sura *Al-Baqara* [*the Cow*], (Q 2:156): "Verily we belong to God and to Him do we return!" (Al-Hakim 1988, 187). Contrary to Beckett's views, Al-Hakim's version of absurdity still carries some hopes in the possibility of God's existence.

The absence of meaningful dialogue is closely related to the theme of infertility in both plays. Beckett composes a drama without any female character. He depicts Godlessness, absence of religion, the boredom of living, the suffering of being, the loss of identity, meaninglessness of life, and the lack of certainty (Nati 2006, 32). To suggest infertility in the godless world of *Waiting for Godot*, only male personages are depicted without any reference to love, woman, happily married life or children. In *The Tree Climber*, Al-Hakim treats women differently. He sheds light on a woman who faces numerous problems in Godless modern life. Behana's ex-husband had forced her to interfere with God's decree and end the life of her child. The abortion caused her infertility and challenged her identity because women's role was bearing children in the traditional Arab society. Since she did not perform her duty as wife and failed to become a mother, Bahadir feels free to kill her and feed her to the tree.

### 3.3. Different Savior, Different Religion

The religious element in these plays differs according to the writer's cultural backgrounds, i.e., Christianity and Islam. Al-Hakim claims that he preserves the national spirit in his works, varying from folklore to religion: "Our goal is to borrow from other sources, to understand and assimilate and then to introduce to the people an art that has the stamp of our values" since it is like "what the Arab philosophers did when they dealt with Plato and Aristotle" (Said 2019, 16). Thus, Dervish is an Islamic figure (Asaad 1989, 162) who represents the eastern transposition of Beckett's characterization of Godot. Al-Hakim made Dervish the representative of divine strength and the link between the human being and the other world. For instance, Dervish moves freely from the past to the present. He boards the train while it is moving. Later, in a flashback scene, he receives his tickets from the air and submits them to the Assistant Ticket Inspector.



Similarly, Godot is a savior in *Waiting for Godot*. Although Godot is absent and Dervish is present, both depict a partly derisive image of God. While Dervish's sporadic aphorism seems spiritually illuminating, Godot's nonexistence, unreliability, and violent behaviors are bordering on anti-religiosity. Godot is indolent and carefree; the messenger Boy informs DiDi, "[Godot] does nothing Sir" (Beckett 2010, 88). Deferring the meeting with the savior indicates that Godot's arrival will put an end to characters' waiting and thus their hope for a better life. In *Waiting for Godot*, the best course of action for the modern man is to wait passively without optimism. In other words, for Beckett, the savior is absent. The play portrays a judgment day where the redeemer clearly postpones his appointment and keeps human at the bay of waiting for an unknown tomorrow.

Al-Hakim depicts religion and spirituality through the complex character of Dervish. Dervish is the amalgamation of folklore personages (Zeyad 1979, 105), shaman and modern human. What Dervish is to Bahadir parallels with what Godot is to Vladimir and Estragon. In addition, DiDi and GoGo do not know "Who Godot is" (Beckett 2010, 19), whereas in *The Tree Climber*, Dervish is represented as a guide for characters inside the play. Bahadir says, "You are a man blessed with powers from God. The veil of the invisible has been lifted from your eyes" (Al-Hakim 1988, 84).

Dervish's voice is omnipresent in every part of the play. He announces that murder is a philosophical crime, revealing that mankind does not kill "for money or passion, but for intellectual reasons [and out of purposelessness]" (Al-Hakim 101). Similarly, because Beckett's characters are devoid of aim and God, they attempt to hang themselves while they are waiting for Godot: "[I'm bored] while waiting . . . what about hanging ourselves?" (Beckett 2010, 13). The situation with Pozzo and Lucky is equally tragic. Pozzo has tied a rope around Lucky's neck. In the absence of God, human condescends to slavery and is unable to think of redemption or salvation.

Just like *Waiting for Godot*, *The Tree Climber* integrates religion with dark humor and irony. It seems that both Godot and Dervish are not authentic enough to replace God. Although Dervish is a spiritual character, there are many comical incidents that questions his validity. Dervish suddenly comes to the scene and accuses Bahadir of murdering his wife. Bahadir asks Dervish, "Why do you accuse me of killing my wife [who is standing in front of you]?" to which Dervish answers, "I do not accuse, I

see” (Al-Hakim 1988, 95). Dervish’s foretelling of the future is closely linked to his train journey, the symbol of the passage of time and life. Inspector asks Dervish about his train ticket and Dervish gives him his birth certificate instead: “This is the ticket by which I travel on the train” (Al-Hakim 1988, 80). On another occasion, Dervish “stretches his hand out of the window into space and produces ten tickets which he hands to the inspector” (Al-Hakim 1988, 82). All the tickets are unanimous and vague so are Dervish’s definition of life and his authenticity as a mystical figure.

### **3.4. Name Significance, Different Absurd Worlds**

In both plays, names bear great symbolic weight. Names do not only signify characters’ existence and identity, but also, they carry the play’s central themes and motifs. Since Beckett mastered both English and French, he blended the tradition of the two cultures, Irish and French in the word “Godot”. In French, the suffix “ot” is a diminutive indicator added to the English word “God”, meaning small God. In Latin, the language of Catholic Church, “ot” forms a masculine noun from a feminine word. However, in Christian tradition, God is often addressed as ‘He’, male. Thus, Beckett’s utilization of “ot” suffix signifies Godot is genderless. Godot is an absent god who beats the messenger Boy and sometimes mistakably “beats [his] brother, [instead of him]” (Beckett 2010, 48). According to Beckett’s characterization, labels associated with God the Son are assigned to the messenger Boy all of which echo Jesus in a satirical manner. The messenger of God(ot), a prophet, is tragicomically beaten and victimized.

“Estragon” has a French root and “Vladimir” is associated with Russian culture (Withanage 2011, 20). They also call each other DiDi and GoGo. Both words, DiDi and GoGo, are associated with imbecility (Morales 2011, 52). Furthermore, Estragon is connected to worldly desires and everyday life since it is a substitute for tarragon, an herb used to season stew, meat, vegetables, and other foods. Pozzo’s name is similar to the spelling of the Italian word “Pazzo,” which means mad, crazy, or irrational (Morales 2011, 52). “Lucky”, Pozzo’s slave, is a popular English nickname, which means “being blessed.” While Lucky is always mistreated by his master, he is very “lucky” that he does not need to decide as everything is already chosen for him by Pozzo. For example, Vladimir asks Pozzo to make Lucky think: “Tell him to think. . . give him his [thinking] hat” (Beckett 2010, 38). Therefore, Beckett uses different

names from several parts of the globe whose majority is Christian to reflect the universal dilemma of human life in a Godless world waiting for never-coming God(ot).

In *The Tree Climber*, the almost identical and rhyming names of the couple “Bahadir” and “Behana” are neither Arabic nor Islamic. They are common names in other Muslim countries like Iran and Turkey.<sup>1</sup> That is how Al-Hakim gives his characters an international flavor. Al-Hakim avoids to address his personages with proper names, i.e., Detective, Dervish, Maid, Assistant Ticket Inspector, and Digger. Even Bahadir and Behana are referred to as Husband and Wife in the characters’ list. Demarcated by their professions, these names portray every man and signify universality in Al-Hakim’s world. Moreover, the character of Dervish is associated with religiosity; it signifies a wise man, and is akin to the role of God in Christianity (Ma’loop 1990, 214).

Both writers exploit the technique of opposition and contradiction to reveal the values of humanity. Since God is demoted to Godot or an erratic Dervish, both writers utilize binary oppositions of the necessarily related sets to describe the purgatorial and uncertain condition of modern human: i.e., order/chaos, rational/irrational, male/female (Kleibo 1986, 99). In addition, this technique illustrates how any individual embodies two contrasting forms of knowledge. However, devoid of a solid ground and bereft of authenticity, these contraries lead to the state of limbo. Al-Hakim mixes western absurdity and Arabic folk art to establish “the philosophy of his age” (1988, 32), while *Waiting for Godot* concentrates on the absurdity of the modern human’s condition in a post-war Godless era. This absurdity can be interpreted in different ways. It has philosophical, religious, and psychological perspectives (Esslin 1965, 39). Through these tramps, Beckett has illustrated his view towards the uncertainty of the human condition in the absence of God and religious authority.

*Waiting for Godot* exposes the notion of infertility in the absence of a female character. On the other hand, in *The Tree Climber*, fertility and hope for a savior are mirrored in the accounts of Bahadir’s wife and her death. She is barren and ironically only her dead body can fertilize the tree garden, symbolizing the meaning of life. Bahadir says: “There is no doubt that this pleased her—that her whole body should be turned into fertilizer, fertilizer of an excellent quality with which to nourish this tree so that it will produce

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1. Al-Hakim’s Turkish mother and her knowledge of Persian literature could be the reason for the name choice.

sturdily growing oranges”; he reminds the audience that Behana “cares so much about sturdy growth” (Al-Hakim 1988, 61).

*The Tree Climber* defies the genre of detective story since it introduces a mystery without solution. Rather than the enigma of murder, it is the mystery of life that Dervish, Bahadir, and Detective strive to solve. Since God does not exist, even Dervish with his foreseeing ability and spiritual power is unable to answer the fundamental questions of modern human.

Unlike *Waiting for Godot*'s absurdist form and content, *The Tree Climber* follows a particular logic (Hassib 2014, 43) though it looks absurdist in structure. There are many symbols that refer to life and hope. Lady Green and the tree are indications of life and its presence. Furthermore, the frequent usage of green color associated with paradise in Quran reveals that Islamic tradition associates green with hope and growth: i.e., Sura *Al-Rahman* [*The Merciful*] (Q 55:76) and *Al-Insan* [*The Man*] (Q 76:21). On the other hand, in *Waiting for Godot*, the characters, setting, and language symbolize modern problems such as meaninglessness of life, lack of fertility, and love, and the absurdity of existence in a Godless world (Roberts 1980, 30-35).

Another redefinition of Beckett's version of absurdity is depicted in introducing a reason for Behana's death. At the end of the play, Behana returns after her three-day disappearance. When Bahadir asks his wife about the reason, he is disappointed by hearing, “Why do you give such credibility to where I was?” (Al-Hakim 1988, 156). Although Dervish tries to define life, for Bahadir and Behana “life is worthless” (Al-Hakim 1988, 158). The meaning of their life is not found in the couple's binding relationship but in the homicide of Behana, the fertilizer of the tree. To the contrary, Estragon and Vladimir irrationally *need* each other during the whole course of the play to prove their own existence. Rather than talking *to* each other, they talk *at* each other. They are tied with a psychological rope like the way Pozzo is physically bounded to Lucky (Esslin 1965, 31). For them, Godot is only an excuse:

We wait. We are bored. No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! (Beckett 2010, 77)

In his introduction to *The Tree Climber*, Al-Hakim states that the “true ground which contained the oeuvre of this whole modern art” is found in the

folk art (1988, 18). This form of art, or what he calls the “expression of reality unrealistically” (Al-Hakim 1988, 18), is manifested in the pre-Islamic era of folkloric tales and songs. The title of the play refers to the nursery rhyme “Tree Climber”. The song is translated as “Oh tree climber brings me a cow/ Milk it and feed me with a china spoon/ Oh cow bring me the tree climber!” (Al-Hakim 1988, 14). This folk song embraces different features of absurdity such as the absence of God, futility, emptiness, meaningless repetition, and lack of communication (Al-Hakim 1988, 14). For Al-Hakim, absurdity is rooted in Arab oral literature and it is not a mere reproduction of western dilemma when religion, especially Christianity, was harshly censured. After the occurrence of the World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) people of the West lost their trust not only in their warmongering governments but also in God and institutionalized religions. Yet, since both authors experienced the fears of war, violence is an inseparable part of their Godless world. DiDi and GoGo’s constant verbal and physical fights, Pozzo’s colonization of Lucky and Godot’s maltreatment of his messenger Boy are the central examples. In *The Tree Climber*, violence reaches the horrendous form of Behana’s murder.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

This research has showed how Samuel Beckett and Tawfiq Al-Hakim, respectively as western and eastern dramatists, exhibit similar characteristics of the Theater of the Absurd such as Godlessness, lack of communication, isolation, futility, and barrenness. The bare stage, irrationality in dialogues and pointless silence, the significance of the names, and the symbolic implication of some stage props like the tree were fully discussed to shed light on the condition of modern human in an absurd, Godless universe.

However, regarding the issues of hope and religion, the playwrights represented different versions of an incongruous agnostic world in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Tree Climber*. It seems that Al-Hakim has approached the theme of absurdity from an Arabic and partly Islamic perspective. For him, the idea of religion, spirituality, and the image of savior as well as his definition of God are embodied in Dervish who concludes the play with the recitation from the Quran. When Dervish claims that we shall all return to God, still there is hope symbolically exemplified in the flourishing of the tree garden. However, for Beckett, the tree functions as gallows for the main characters to commit suicide due to boredom and futility. Religious

hope and God are represented in the image of the never-coming Godot, a small, genderless god.

Al-Hakim did not copy the European features of the absurd; instead, he adjusted them to the particular cultural setting of his work. Although Al-Hakim has been greatly influenced by the western absurd literature, he refuses to superimpose western values onto his play. He has the ability to reproduce western ideas, adapt them, integrate them with Arab folklore, and make them his own.

Beckett depicts the isolation of human beings who have lost their connection with God and other humans. Al-Hakim has attempted to indigenize western absurdity to tailor it for the Arab homeland. He believes that Arabs tackle with the same problems but in a different way. Thus, *The Tree Climber* has emerged as a result of a negotiation between the eastern and the western views toward a Godless world.

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